



The Good Girls: Locked up, locked out and locked down

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Abstract

On the 24th March 2020, the New Zealand Prime Minister announced the country would go into a Covid-19 lockdown. Two days later a new reality dawned with all businesses, organisations and educational institutions closed, except those deemed ‘essential’. Within a week media reports started to emerge, suggesting that Covid-19 would adversely impact on women and girls to a greater extent and that women make up the majority of workers in frontline essential work. In order to make sense of this lockdown experience, the authors of this article, four academic women, reached out to each other to share their lockdown experiences in a collaborative research project. Drawing on narrative inquiry methodology, this article highlights storytelling as a method to explore, analyse and present new understandings about the phenomenon. This article confirms how lockdown created boundaries for the authors. These are reflected in the creation of a personal experience story i.e. one summative narrative in which Lisa is the representative character, the “good girl”. The story illustrates the dislocation and disconnection imposed on the authors during lockdown and depicts the internal and external struggles of being “expected” to continue in various ‘gendered’ roles as a caring mother, manager, daughter, grandmother, and academic.

Keywords: collaboration, dislocation, gendered roles, lockdown, personal experience story.

Introduction

On the 24th March 2020, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, announced that the country would go into a Covid-19 related level four lockdown in 48 hours. Level four is the highest of four alert levels in the New Zealand context reflecting the belief that community transmission is widespread. On the following day a national state of emergency was declared

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and, on the 26th March, a new level four reality dawned with all businesses, organisations and educational institutions closed except those deemed ‘essential’ (Jamieson, 2020).

Media reports circulated suggesting that Covid -19 would adversely impact on women and girls to a greater extent and that women made up the majority of workers in frontline essential work (Johnston & Knox, 2020). At a government level, the New Zealand Ministry for Women reported that women and girls were expected to experience greater negative outcomes than other sectors of society (Ministry for Women, 2020; Panui Wahine, 2020). The United Nations (UN Women 2020) released reports attesting to the view that women and girls would be left behind in the emerging responses to Covid-19, while the World Health Organisation (2020) signalled the worsening health and social outcomes for women and girls under Covid-19. It became increasingly evident that the lockdown phenomenon was a flashpoint in terms of gender and equity issues and that some groups would experience even greater adversity than others due to the intersectional nature of their disadvantage (Acker, 2006).

The authors of this article were drawn together through their mutual engagement in gender and diversity research. As lockdown unfolded and structural inequalities became a focus of discussion in the media, the four authors felt increasingly powerless and side-lined. In an attempt to push back and make sense of this extraordinary lockdown experience, the authors reached out to each other in an act of ‘internal’ and virtual activism, sharing their lockdown experiences.

This article documents the unique ‘lockdown’ collaborative research experience. The authors begin by discussing the research methodology chosen to frame this research. They also explore the significance of storytelling, not just as a medium for exploring the lockdown experiences and perceptions but also as a way of presenting the findings via the collaborative writing of a personal experience story. In itself, the practice of writing differently (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018) is also a form of resistance to the dislocation experienced during this period, associated with a feeling of being ‘locked out’ from the instrumental and political processes of the neo-liberal academy. In the final section of the article the authors reflect on two key themes - dislocation and the exacerbation of a gendered life context (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2013; 2015) - that emerged from the individual stories in the collaborative research process.

Literature

Stories, whether they are our own stories or other people’s stories can facilitate an unfolding of oneself through the exploration of experiences and related feelings and take us through the disruptions and transitions of the life course. Stories help make sense of changing circumstances (McAdams & Bowman, 2001), give us focus and validate our individual contexts (Atkinson, 1995; 2002). The telling or writing of stories allows the researcher to explore the individual’s



experiences, values, decisions and ideologies, and the process of interviewing uncovers information at a deeper and more personal level than the survey, focus group or informal interview (Johnson, 2002). Drawing out people's ideas in their own words is particularly significant when studying women's stories, ensuring that their experiences are no longer invisible (Author, 2016; Simpson & Lewis, 2007).

Polkinghorne (1995) describes narrative inquiry as a group of research designs under the umbrella of qualitative research. He identifies two approaches in the field of narrative inquiry: the paradigmatic type, which develops categories and themes from analyses of the storied data, and the narrative type, which produces explanatory stories through analyses of events and experiences (Bruner, 1986; 1991). In both approaches, Polkinghorne (1995) sees the plot as the centre of a framework for organising and understanding text and themes, while acknowledging that across the broad field of qualitative research, researchers attach a range of other meanings to the term 'narrative'. This narrative research project draws on both the paradigmatic and narrative approach to explore the 'lockdown' experiences and perceptions of four women in academia. Although they are all broadly 'early to mid-career' they are of varying ages and life stages.

Gathering stories through Interactive and Collaborative Interviews

Narrative inquiry elicits researcher/respondent reciprocity, ensuring that process and outcomes inform the construction of sense making and meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005; 2011). Narrative interviewing has evolved from a process of individual one-way questioning (involving separation and objectivity) to a more relational and interactive process of double subjectivity (Lewis & Meredith, in Ellis & Berger, 2003). Indeed feminist researchers have long argued that research cannot be value free (Olesen, 2005) and that the researcher-respondent relationship is developed in a context where interviewer power and control can dominate the research process and outcomes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Narrative scholars aware of issues around respondent vulnerability (Reinharz, & Chase; 2002), sometimes utilise interactive interviewing to gather respondent stories. It is argued that researchers need to be empathetic, reflexive and ethical in their research endeavours, ensuring that the respondents and their constituents are also beneficiaries of the research (Josselson, 1996). Thus, interactive interviewing:

"becomes less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represent how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others and provide stories that open up conversations about how we live and cope" (Ellis & Berger, 2003, pp 472).

Collaborative interviewing, an extension of interactive interviewing, recognises the inherent imbalance of power and emotionality in the research process. As researchers and respondents



increasingly engaged in reflection, researchers began to look for ways to address interviewer vulnerability (Johnson, 2002). It was suggested that one way to address this was to engage in research which involves family, friends, colleagues or peers, especially when topics were of a highly sensitive nature (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Having already established trusted and equal relationships, this enables researchers to share their stories, analyse them and create and recreate new understandings and insights together (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008). In their discussion on collaborative interviewing, Ellis and Berger (2003) identify the types of collaborative ‘self’ stories that researchers write. These are highly reflexive pieces that include the researcher being integral to the storyline or drawing on the researchers own story as a basis for the research. The authors go on to identify four categories of collaborative interviewing: reflexive dyadic interviews, interactive interviews, mediated co-constructed narratives and finally unmediated co-constructed narratives. It is to this last category, that the authors turn to as a general framework for our lockdown research project.

Unmediated co/constructed collaborative narratives, enable the researcher to focus on exploring their own experiences and perceptions, rather than being interviewed by another individual. While documented practice of this approach generally involves just two researchers (Ellis & Berger, 2003), in this lockdown project there were four academic women researchers engaged. One collaborative narrative evolved from the extraordinary times experienced by the four individuals, each locked in a ‘bubble’ that galvanised their resolve to collectively ‘do something’, to try to make sense of what was going on.

Challenging academic hegemony and writing from the heart

Microsoft Teams, the university work designated communication and collaboration platform, and Zoom, provided the communication conduit that supported the storytelling, story writing and article writing experiences. At the beginning of the research project during the preliminary conversations the four authors agreed that they wanted to engage in a process that enabled them to explore their individual and shared vulnerabilities in the unique context of the pandemic lockdown. The authors discussed the importance of trusting themselves and each other in a collaborative research process. They shared a strong bond developed through teaching, service and research activities over a number of years and brought a common critical and gendered research framework to this engagement.

Thus, the four women researchers wanted to write about their lockdown experiences differently. As discussed above, they were drawn to storytelling through the interactive and collaborative interview process, and they did not wish to move away from this non-traditional approach in the process of writing the journal article. As per Kiriakos and Tienari (2018, p.263) they wanted to do it differently and move away from the “rational and predictable activity that targets



publications in the right journals”. In the article the authors wanted to be free to challenge the hegemonic structures that were at the core of their experiences and reflections as women in academia. In this sense their research process, including the final writing process, was carried out as “an embodied, sensuous, emotional, social, and identity-related activity” (Kiriakos and Tienari (2018, p.263). The intention was to write from their hearts and the authors believed that this was not possible within the confines of the traditional structure of an academic article.

Research Process

Under the umbrella of Narrative Inquiry Methodology (Chase, 2005; Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007) a three-step research process was developed, drawing on both Narrative Inquiry approaches i.e. the paradigmatic type (PT) (Polkinghorne, 1995) and the narrative type (NT) (Bruner, 1986) where analysis results in the creation or production of actual stories (Myers, 2016).

Step one. Writing the individual researcher’s story (NT)

Each of the four authors wrote a 300 – 500 word story on their professional and personal experiences of lockdown. The women were free to focus on whatever aspects they felt were important in terms of their lived ‘lockdown’ experience. Once the stories were written they were uploaded to a drop box ready for the next step.

Step two. Listening, reading and reflecting on all of the individual stories drawing out themes, categories and insights (PT)

Two zoom meetings were scheduled a week apart for one hour. At each meeting two of the authors read their stories aloud. It was the first time the other women had heard the stories. They focused on the storyteller listening carefully to what was said and how it was said and interruptions to the storytelling process were not permitted. At the conclusion of the story, the listeners were able to ask questions, seek clarification, and share some observations in a general discussion.

After the zoom meeting the authors wrote their reflections on each of the stories, highlighting themes and insights and uploaded these to the drop box for others to read.

Step three. Writing the personal experience story (NT)

The collaboration of all four authors in recreating a new personal experience story completes the three-step narrative process (McCormick, 2004). An important issue in this step was to keep in mind not so much the words but how those words construct reality (Bruner, 1991). Bell (1998)



suggests one summative narrative is an effective way to interpret different individual stories on the same theme or research question (Bold, 2012), by integrating a selection of findings, themes and insights into a general story (Crossley, 2000; McCormick, 2004).

Ethics

Working through the University ethics committee decision making tree, the authors determined that formal ethical approval was not necessary for this research. Nevertheless, ethical considerations were at the forefront of the project. As stated earlier, the authors of this article were drawn together through their mutual interest in gender and diversity research. Thus, they shared much in common in the academic context having worked collaboratively in a range of academic research, writing, seminar development and conference convening. All four authors are critical scholars and have established a high level of trust amongst each other over an extended period of time. Earlier in this article the discussion on unmediated co/constructed collaborative narratives, highlights the importance of participants having already established trusted and equal relationships and this was certainly the situation with the authors. This high level of mutual respect and trust enabled the authors to focus on exploring their own experiences and perceptions and sharing them openly among each other. Therefore, anonymity among the authors was not required as it was very important that they could openly share their stories, analyse them and create and recreate new understandings and insights together (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008).

Trust was also achieved through the authors' engagement in feminist research in which issues of power and privilege are examined and critiqued. In the initial discussion around engaging in this collaborative research project, issues around research design, power, risk and security were discussed and it was agreed that although the authors were all early to mid-career researchers, it was important to take care that no one person dominated, that the information that was shared could be withdrawn at any point, and that the article writing and content must be approved by all four authors. In developing the research design, the authors worked collaboratively and agreed via the virtual discussion medium, that narrative and collaborative frameworks were integral to the research design. As they were keen to write an article for publication when author names would be public, they were also not concerned about anonymising any individual information. Additionally, the writing of a personal experience (collaborative) story, which is integral to this article, is not a narrative about a specific author, but rather a summative narrative (Myers, 2016).

The Personal Experience Story

Lisa was the name chosen for the woman academic who is the protagonist in the personal experience story. The average age of the four women is 52 so the name was chosen as it was the



most popular female name in New Zealand in 1968. Lisa is not one specific person. She represents all four researchers. She is also representative of the authors' colleagues, peers and friends and on 26th March 2020 Lisa entered into a national lockdown in response to the Global Covid -19 pandemic. This was unprecedented in her lifetime and the following story of Lisa reflects some key findings and insights about how the authors lived and how they coped (Ellis and Berger, 2003).

Locked out and locked up in 'Lockdown'

On the eve of lockdown Lisa looked out the window by the front door and gave the thumbs up to her adult son. He had driven for two hours from out of town to deliver essential groceries. There were no flowers she noted wistfully, but she was immensely grateful for the gesture. She and he hurriedly exchanged poignant air kisses and pressed their palms up against the window in a Covid 'high-five' before he hightailed it back down the line to reach home before curfew.

Lisa felt as though she had been trapped on the treadmill of life for as long as she could remember. She had left her marriage when the children were much younger and since then they had always lived with her. It had been challenging and chaotic and there were times when Lisa likened parenting to climbing a mountain with one arm tied behind her back. Her two younger children were now in their mid to late teens and lived with her. Her oldest child, the 'grocer' son, had his first child late 2019. Lisa had immediately fallen in love with her grandson and desperately wanted to spend more time with him.

Her professional life was equally tumultuous and demanding what with developing new papers and researching and teaching ever increasing numbers of students. Two months earlier Lisa had also agreed to take on a temporary management role. "Just short term," they said. "keep things ticking over." Mmm...she had done these acting roles before.

But, in the 48 hours before lockdown it seemed to Lisa that her treadmill was spinning on steroids. A serious medical diagnosis, an unexpected delay in her house settlement and a caretaker management role which suddenly morphed into something much more, left Lisa feeling disoriented, disheartened, and dispossessed. After a lifetime of working, caregiving and working some more she had nowhere to go....and with her newly bestowed 'immunosuppressed' status, suitcases of clothes, laptop and two teenagers in tow ...she hurriedly negotiated a house-sit for the duration.

The next week or so passed in a haze of sleep, work, daily Covid updates, virtual meetings, cooking, caring, and relentless phone calls. The house was tiny, and her teens were forced to share a room, so space was at a premium. Lisa's bedroom, once a private space, an oasis for



meditation, reflection and respite, became a virtual thoroughfare where she received university updates, joined faculty meetings, talked with staff, negotiated with HR, emailed her students, smoothed her teenagers' angsts and checked in on her son, his family and her frail elderly mother in aged residential care.

Lisa felt increasingly uncomfortable with her pragmatic management mantle...oftentimes conflicting with her more critical and 'idealist' researcher voice. But she was tired, all 'zoomed out' and zombie like. While others chatted on through the TV screen about a different way of being, she was beyond wanting to make sense of anything, so she slept some more.

But Lisa was no sleeping beauty and when she awoke, she was assailed by her responsibilities as the emails jammed her inbox. The rhetoric was clear and kindly at first, 'teaching is important, and students are paramount...just do your best...teaching comes first....be patient...and finally 'stay safe and wash your hands'. Doh!

She followed all of the mantras ...because at heart she was a 'good' girl... she believed students are important. But as the weeks rolled by a new rhetoric slipped into the communications... 'do your best ...but have a look at this...and...don't forget your research'. Then the email came about financial constraints. She had expected all of these nuanced statements and evolving messages and processes. But it was another matter trying to communicate it to staff with empathy and clarity. It was deeply frustrating for Lisa as she realised the limitations of her temporary role, but still she persevered with as much kindness and compassion as she could muster.

Then came the surveys of staff and student satisfaction and then communications around student dissatisfaction...she worried about her future...were her students satisfied...was she doing enough....what to do about research? She joined the university-wide zoom meetings where leaders asked, 'who are our heroes?' and celebrated the efforts of high profile staff and researchers. Lisa worried even more after that. She knew she wasn't 'hero' material.

Lisa also knew that 'it takes a village', and during lockdown she just didn't have one. Her teens were restless...living in such close proximity and with just one functional laptop between them. Late one afternoon after a testing day on the home and work front, she sat down to watch the news. The teens tussled over the remote, but Lisa remained resolute. 'We are watching the news together...no argument!' They sat in sombre silence as visuals and soundbites poured out of the screen enveloping them in despair and death...Italy, Spain, India. Lisa could no longer manage the groundswell of grief that had been building and as her tears began to flow her teens moved quietly to her side, holding her with their awkward arms while murmuring "it's OK...it's OK". There they sat until disturbed by knocking at the front door. The teens moved like lightening and



as they ripped open the front door Lisa heard a loud “Woohoo”. They returned to the lounge, one clutching the pizza from the grocery delivery and the other reverently holding the new laptop, ordered three weeks ago. As they high-fived each other jubilantly and disappeared to the kitchen, Lisa sighed.

It just ‘is what it is’ Lisa thought. She knew she could keep going so she fired off a few more emails to staff and students. At one level Lisa knew they were privileged....but at another level with their suitcase of clothes and their trusty laptops she knew they were truly ‘locked out, locked up and locked down’. ‘This too will pass’...she murmured to herself as she played another round of solitaire and slipped into yet another fleeting sleep.

Reflections

Lisa’s personal experience story reflects two of several key themes that emerged from the lockdown stories of the four academic women. While the experience was constructed by the authors as a gendered narrative, their stories suggest that this gendered aspect was exacerbated during ‘lockdown’. Lisa also experienced dislocation across several aspects of her life, again made worse by the lack of community and relational connections which were integral to the authors’ pre-lockdown way of being.

Exacerbation of a Gendered Life Context

Before lockdown Lisa’s personal and professional life was a gendered experience (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015). The act of nurturing and caring was central to all her personal relationships. She was raising her three children, managing the care of an elderly mother in age residential care and now she had a grandson to add to the mix. Lisa was a full-time member of the so-called ‘sandwich’ generation (see Burke & Calvano, 2017), pivoting here and there as her family life morphed with the demands and expectations of each intergenerational layer.

Lockdown saw the intensification of these demands and expectations, thus heightening the gendered nature of the experience and Lisa was at the core of this whirlpool of responsibility. Lisa’s story also brings to the fore the importance of ‘home’ that was prevalent in the author’s own stories. Lisa’s story reflects this in terms of her unexpected homelessness and the ‘virtual’ unilateral invasion of work into her home and bedroom. For women, the home/work lines are often blurred. This is a tension that is often acutely experienced, and for many involves a tactical approach – how to attend to responsibilities at home, whilst still appearing to ‘be’ ‘at work’? Acker’s (2006) term ‘provisioning’ captures this dilemma; considering the ability to provide for oneself and one’s dependents and the varied activities that link paid work to the home and the rest of life such as arranging care for dependents, childcare, cleaning and cooking (Acker,



2006a). Thus, home is the place of nurturing, of building a ‘home’ from a house. This was doubly challenging for Lisa, who was trying to quickly create a home out of a stranger’s house. This seems to be a largely gendered process. From observation and conversations, it seems that for many men, the house is an ‘investment’, an extension of the neo-liberal inspired societal primacy given to capital and wealth accumulation above all else (Hyman, 2017). For women, it is relationally bound. Now, suddenly in lockdown, the private and professional domains collided, and Lisa wondered how her male colleagues experienced this? Did they engage in more family responsibilities? Did they experience the endless meal preparation that came with work-as-home? One author anecdotally reported seeing wives/partners delivering refreshments to male colleagues during Zoom meetings. Lisa’s story implicitly captures these gendered issues around home making, referred to by some who work in academia as the ‘motherhood penalty’ (e.g. Baker, 2012; Batsheva & Arthur, 2020; Harris, Myers & Ravenswood, 2017). She longed to have flowers in her house. She tried to create time together with her teens in the evening. She cooked everyday, only to be finally undone by the arrival of a frozen pizza!

In Lisa’s personal experience story, she refers to her temporary management role “short term...keep things ticking over.” This reflects the experiences of three of the authors who had undertaken higher status, temporary ‘fill-in’ management roles in the last five years, yet none of them had achieved/applied for a permanent appointment. The gendered nature of ‘taking on extra (short term) responsibilities’ is well documented in the literature (e.g. Acker, 2006; Fotaki, 2013). Lisa had looked forward to developing the team and connecting with staff in a relational and meaningful way. Instead Covid-19 had created a vastly different management context. Caring for her staff was compromised as she became cast in the unwelcome role of a conveyor of information about the rapidly changing university strategy to manage Covid-19.

Personal and Professional Dislocation

When lockdown was announced Lisa’s world was turned upside down. While populist discourse celebrated the confluence of work and home and the emergence of 21st century ‘zoomies’ (Templeton, 2020), Lisa’s life seems to dislocate in a perfect personal and professional storm. A health issue was finally diagnosed and although this was a relief to Lisa it meant that she went into lockdown a day earlier, with little time to prepare. Although her two teens were with her Lisa was dislocated from her wider family by the restrictions of lockdown. This was illustrated by the helplessness she felt around her mother’s possible plight in the age care residential home. Her heart was also broken at the prospect of not seeing her precious grandson for the foreseeable future. This shutting down of family connections was illustrated by the physical glass barrier which defined the final high-five with her son. Finally, an unexpected state of homelessness pushed Lisa over the edge. Lisa’s personal experience story captures the ‘dislocation’



experienced by the four authors during lockdown. Without her ‘village’ i.e. her support networks, friends and colleagues, Lisa wondered how she would have the wherewithal to manage and move forward. Gao and Sai (2020) speak of this isolation from the perspective of the single woman living alone. However, in Lisa’s case, this was not just isolation, but also multi-layered dislocation.

The dislocation continued on a professional level. Lisa was dislocated from a sense of achievement in her work. She had envisaged enacting meaningful leadership and facilitating staff development and engagement. In return she looked forward to personal challenge and career development. However, this reciprocity faltered in the lockdown context and Lisa’s personal experience story paints a picture of pragmatic survival. She felt she was neither management nor staff but caught in the twilight zone of academia, dislocated and alone. While others seemed satisfied and performing to increasing expectations, these were elusive to Lisa who struggled to “give” to everyone: students, children, colleagues, family and research.

A Good Girl

The one aspect which Lisa was not dislocated from was the sense of obligation and caring responsibilities, most well captured in the statement ‘a good girl’. Kass (2015) describes the gendered social requirements which encompass being ‘good’. Lisa’s caring and concern for family added additional emotional work to already overloaded personal and professional roles. Her sense of responsibility to students, coming from a ‘real’ commitment to teaching-as-vocation was stretched not only by the unusual online classroom context, but also by the circumstances facing her students; as rapport-building is such an important part of her teaching approach. Lisa’s personal experience story suggests at an implicit level that the sense of compliance, care and responsibility is acutely gendered. For Kass (2015) in addition to the obligation felt, the notion of being ‘good’ is also associated with self-silencing, which we also see reflected in Lisa’s quiet acceptance of her situation and seeming unwillingness to ‘rock the boat’.

Similarly, we wonder how prevalent the notion of teaching-as-vocation is amongst male colleagues? Or within the university setting, is the pressure for men to be ‘real’ academics i.e. research-driven? How then, might their lockdown experience have been different? The concern for students and staff for Lisa was acute; was this experienced by male colleagues?

Conclusion

It is true that lockdown created boundaries for women, including the four academic women in this conversation. However, it is clear and reflected in Lisa’s personal experience story that prior gendered realities existed and were exacerbated by lockdown. The authors acknowledged their



gendered life course prior Covid-19, how they experienced increased dislocation and disconnection during lockdown, and how these experiences can expose the gendered nature of seemingly ‘universal’ events. Lisa’s story shines a light on the exhaustion and guilt associated with performative caring roles both in the home (now invaded by work) and the workplace (now at home). It caused the authors to wonder whether male colleagues would feel this way or whether male colleagues would be expected to perform this caring role? Lisa’s story depicts the internal and external struggles of being “expected” to continue in various roles as a caring mother, manager, daughter, grandmother, and academic. These things are not separate, they are part of gendered identities both imposed and performed. The lifelong performance of the “good girl”.

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